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Central Intelligence Agency

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Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

6 November 1985

Chile's Cardinal Fresno, A Political PrimateSummary

Cardinal Juan Francisco Fresno has emerged as a key actor on the Chilean political scene in the past few months. His influence has grown to the point that he may well play a vital role—perhaps second only to that of President Pinochet—in determining whether the country achieves an orderly transition to civilian rule or becomes increasingly polarized over the next few years. []

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Fresno's sudden rise to prominence is mainly due to his success in bringing together a disparate group of political leaders, persuading them to compromise on widely divergent positions, and obtaining their endorsement of a set of proposals for an accelerated transition to democracy—the National Accord—that was presented to the government in late August. Pinochet has rejected the accord and, partly as a result, his popularity is at an alltime low, his political base is narrowing, and public criticism of his leadership is mounting. The Cardinal is actively involved in promoting public support for the accord, especially by trying to ensure that its signatories remain united and committed to the document's basically moderate proposals. He appears determined to continue pressing the regime—if not Pinochet, at least the

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[] ALA/SAD/W, in response to a request from Jacqueline Tillman,
National Security Council Staff. []

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armed forces—to accept the accord as the basis for negotiating a definite timetable for political liberalization and Pinochet's ultimate departure from the presidency. [REDACTED]

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Because of his new activism, Fresno is now viewed by Pinochet and his hardline advisers as a major enemy, and the regime has launched a campaign to denigrate the national accord, its signatories, and even the Cardinal. Although the relationship between Fresno and Pinochet is likely to remain conflictive for the foreseeable future, several senior government officials and much of the military view the accord favorably and do not share Pinochet's animosity toward the Cardinal. [REDACTED]

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The Communists and other far leftists—who were excluded from the accord at Fresno's insistence—fear that the Cardinal's efforts will succeed, and to prevent this, they may try to escalate violence. In our view, Pinochet will exploit any sudden increase in Communist-sponsored violence as justification for continuing his harsh policies, rallying the military around him again, and undercutting the accord—and Fresno. [REDACTED]

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* * * *

Fresno's Evolving Role

When Fresno was appointed Archbishop of Santiago and primate of the Chilean Catholic Church in early 1983, it was generally expected that, as the leader of the traditionalist wing of the hierarchy, he would assume a much lower profile than his predecessor, Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez, a longtime critic of Pinochet. A widely respected figure within and outside the church, Fresno had a reputation for prudence and moderation and for believing that the church should concentrate on its pastoral role; others in the church, especially Liberation Theology proponents, supported political activism and outright opposition to the regime. [REDACTED]

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Fresno's appointment was greeted enthusiastically by government spokesmen, and, according to the US Embassy, Pinochet was convinced that future relations with the church no longer would be difficult. The Embassy reports that Mrs. Pinochet, a staunch Catholic and close adviser to her husband on political and church matters, commented that Fresno's appointment was a miracle that would "save" the church. Pinochet attended Fresno's first mass as head of the church, invited him to lunch, and sent the Archbishop a Bible for his birthday. For over a year, the two maintained cordial relations. Until late 1984, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Fresno was encouraged by his contacts with Pinochet. [REDACTED]

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Publicly, Fresno seemed to move deliberately down a middle path during the series of monthly antiregime protests that prevailed throughout 1983. In August of that year, Pinochet listened to the advice he reportedly received from the military high command to moderate his policies and appointed an oldline politician, Sergio Jarpa, as Interior Minister to begin a dialogue with moderate opposition parties over the transition process. Fresno played a key role in persuading the leaders of the moderate opposition coalition, Democratic Action, to agree to talks with Jarpa. Nevertheless, aside from serving as intermediary—he convened the first talks in his own offices—Fresno was not an active proponent of any particular position. []

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When after a period of months the opposition suspended the talks, citing lack of movement, and resumed antiregime protests, Fresno continued to keep a low profile. He moved progressively away from the regime, however, and [] after Pinochet reimposed the state of siege in November 1984, Fresno decided to try to bring the opposition together in a broad civic front with a view toward pressuring the government to agree to negotiations on a transition to civilian rule. The strong attacks by regime spokesmen against the church at that time, including accusations that leading church figures were cooperating with Communists in antiregime actions, also contributed to Fresno's decision to shift course, according to the US Embassy []. []

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Fresno's position was greatly strengthened when he was named in April 1985 as the third Cardinal in Chilean history. His appointment was well received in most segments of Chilean society and became a source of national pride. It also underscored, according to the US Embassy, the support of the Pope for democratization in Chile. The Vatican reportedly hoped that Fresno's elevation would endow him with greater authority and freedom to pursue a moderate course in political and church affairs. []

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[] by the time of his elevation to Cardinal, Fresno had become convinced that Pinochet could not be talked into leaving office, nor could an early transition be negotiated with him on a friendly basis. Instead, [] Fresno had concluded that it was necessary to mobilize public opinion into a force sufficiently strong to pressure the President into accepting negotiations. The new Cardinal, therefore, quietly accelerated his efforts to bring the opposition together. The US Embassy reports that over a period of months he held behind-the-scenes meetings with numerous political, labor, and business leaders to discuss areas of agreement and to explore prospects for a broad civic front. Moreover, he met several times with the Interior Minister, the key civilian Cabinet member, to emphasize that his goal was not to overthrow the government but to reach an understanding with it, according to the US Embassy. []

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Early this past summer, Fresno asked three close advisers to draft a tentative proposal to be reviewed by the leaders of 11 mainstream political parties. This document was then debated and revised by the political leaders at the Cardinal's urging, and a compromise draft was approved and signed in late August. The parties overcame several major sticking points, including the key issue of whether to proscribe the Communist Party from participation in the political process—a question that was left to the future deliberations of a constitutional tribunal. The US Embassy views the national accord as a carefully crafted, flexible, moderate, and basically reasonable document. The accord indirectly recognizes the validity of the 1980 Constitution, implicitly accepts Pinochet as president for the remainder of his term, calls for legislation to establish direct presidential and congressional elections, and insists on immediate restoration of civil liberties. It also rules out putting military officers on trial for political crimes, a point the signatories considered necessary to win armed forces backing for the accord. [REDACTED]

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Pinochet's Reaction

The US Embassy reports that Fresno's elevation to Cardinal so displeased Pinochet that the President refused to go to the airport to greet the church leader upon his return from the Vatican. The President's attitude became openly hostile as a result of Fresno's role in the national accord, [REDACTED]. The US Embassy reports that Pinochet even told the Papal Nuncio last summer that the church's oppositionist activities under Fresno had led him to consider changing his religion. [REDACTED]

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Pinochet emphatically rebuffed Fresno during a mid-July meeting when the Cardinal urged the President to agree to a dialogue with the opposition in order to avoid an escalation of political unrest, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] When Fresno relayed a message from the Pope that he would not visit Chile until the government relaxes its ironclad control, Pinochet reportedly replied that he would not take orders from the Pope and that he had no intention of allowing dialogue or deviating from the timetable of the 1980 Constitution, which provides for a transition to begin in 1989. In response, Fresno reportedly warned Pinochet that the church might join the opposition in protesting against the President's policies. On several subsequent occasions, according to the US Embassy, Pinochet has made a point of snubbing the Cardinal in public and permitting actions by the security forces that were intended as a slap at the church. [REDACTED]

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The regime likewise has taken several steps in recent weeks to denigrate the national accord and to attempt to undermine Fresno's public stature. According to the US Embassy, senior government officials have allowed unflattering comments about the Cardinal and other bishops to leak to the press. [REDACTED] a government

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campaign initiated by Pinochet in late September to discredit the national accord and its sponsors involves a concerted disinformation effort and planned activities to provoke discord between the political parties and the church's hierarchy. [REDACTED]

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Fresno's Position in the Church

Fresno's actions on behalf of political liberalization since becoming head of the Catholic Church evidently have dampened the internal unrest the church has experienced in recent years largely because of divisions between activist priests and more conservative members of the hierarchy. His strong record as a defender of human rights and his condemnations of government repression, coupled with his firm stance against the use of violence by the opposition, have strengthened his influence within the church, [REDACTED] He has dealt effectively with activist priests at the lower levels, who previously had accused him of being a government pawn and of ignoring the plight of the poor. He has publicly attacked those ecclesiastics who have made polemical declarations on political issues. Furthermore, he suspended a priest who expressed support for a leftist terrorist group last year. [REDACTED]

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We believe Fresno's efforts to rein in activist priests stem from his belief that involvement of clergy in radical political activity will eventually hurt the church. Fresno attributes such activity to liberation theology, which he sees as a greater danger to Chile than Communism, [REDACTED]

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The new Cardinal has also been able to count on the support of his predecessor, Cardinal Silva, who many believed might try to undermine Fresno's authority within the church because the two have different philosophies regarding church activism and on how to pressure the government to speed up the transition process. Recent efforts by top government officials to drive a wedge between the two have failed. [REDACTED]

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Continued Turmoil Likely

The moderate opposition and Catholic Church leaders appear to be convinced that the political tide is running in their favor, and the moderates are working hard to preserve their still fragile unity. The accord continues to attract wide public support, as evidenced by the growing success of a petition-signing campaign in its behalf. The accord's sponsors maintain publicly that virtually everything in their proposal is negotiable, but they insist that there must be concrete liberalization

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measures soon, such as enactment of laws permitting political parties to function freely and an early lifting of restrictions on civil liberties.

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Cardinal Fresno has told the US Embassy that he will soon begin pressing the government, and, if necessary, senior military officers, to accept him as a mediator to arrange talks. Nevertheless, we believe Fresno faces a difficult task over the next six months or so in keeping the accord alive, pressing the regime to negotiate, and more generally working to ensure that the difficult Chilean political climate does not deteriorate into sharp polarization and escalating violence.

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The US Embassy reports that the regime hopes to reach the Chilean summer vacation period—December–March—without making concessions on the accord; it appears to believe that Fresno and the accord's other sponsors eventually will simply give up and that popular interest will dissipate. There is increasing evidence of disgruntlement within the military over Pinochet's stance on the national accord and his antagonism toward Fresno. We believe that he will have serious problems with the armed forces if he continues to ignore those in the military—and the civilian bureaucracy—who advocate a more accommodating stance on the national accord.

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Fresno the Man

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Fresno was ordained as a priest in 1937. He subsequently studied at the Catholic University of Santiago and earned a degree in canonical law at the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome. Prior to becoming Archbishop of Santiago, he had served for 16 years as bishop of La Serena, a

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provincial mining area 300 miles north of Santiago.



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